Seattle Urban Sustainability Forum

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Thanks to Mayor Nickels, Diane, Lynne and the City of Seattle for inviting me here and for hosting this excellent series of discussions on sustainable cities. Seattle has been at the forefront of the livable communities discussion for well over a decade, so it's only right that this Forum should be taking place. A former colleague of mine from Cambridge, Kit Perkins, was a founding trustee of Sustainable Seattle, having gotten her graduate planning degree at UW. She now runs a sustainable agriculture organization called the Intervale Foundation based in Burlington, VT, so the seeds have spread.

Now, as the new head of a foundation concerned primarily with the relationship between land use and sustainability, I'd like to open my remarks by invoking the poet Gary Snyder, the Sierra poet, who writes that "We must learn to know, love and join our place even more than we love our own ideas. . . . People who can agree that they share a commitment to the landscape — even if they are otherwise locked in struggle with each other — have at least one deep thing to share."

I invoke the lines of a poet for two reasons: First, because I believe that creating sustainable communities is just that, a creative, artful kind of work as much as it is a technical, scientific kind, and Second, because I believe that land and landscapes, as Snyder suggests, can be uniquely a powerful lever for engaging people otherwise divided in a shared enterprise, for inspiring the kind of civic participation and innovation that is, ultimately, the driver of sustainable practices and places.

Land use, in other words, is both the backstory and potential enabler of sustainable development; it is, literally and figuratively, the platform upon which we build sustainable communities.

So what does this mean? Well, just look around you. Whether here Washington state, or in Vermont, where I live, or any other part of the country, local citizens, state governments and, dare I say it, even our federal government, if only accidentally, are confronting land use challenges underlying which are the seminal public policy decisions, or more precisely, sustainable development decisions, of our time.

Think wind turbines v. ridgelines [slide 1], a land use planning proxy for the heated debate about not only our energy future, but national security, climate change, and the very way in which we as a people, a culture, construct our aesthetic model of nature -- Pristine Versus Industrialized. Remember, every decision about energy, renewable or otherwise, requires first a decision about where you're going to extract it, produce it, put it -- someone's backyard, viewshed, or habitat.

Think Big Box versus farm field [slide 2], a land use cliché of our era if there ever was one, symbolizing a battle over local business against global, local design versus Anywhere USA,

living wages as against the bare minimum, parking lots or cow pastures, ready access to cheap goods versus a 60 mile round trip.

And think affordable housing development versus wetlands [slide 3], where in too many communities the only real estate left for construction of much-needed low-income and affordable housing are the bottomlands, wildlife habitat and other open spaces long considered unsuitable for development but an attractive target for both housing advocates and birdwatchers because there's simply nowhere else to go

These and other land use planning challenges are really but a window, often a broken one, into the soul of communities struggling to come to terms with an unsustainable past and a better pathway to the future. In turn, this path requires, as it must, difficult, indeed wrenching, compromises and trade-offs; more housing, less open space; more wind turbines, less undeveloped ridgelines; cheaper appliances, jeans and potato chips, fewer farmfields. Competing goals, often competing public goods. Is reconciliation, is integration of these goals even possible?

What we have stumbled upon in the early 21st century is the result of decades, even centuries worth of decisions made in the absence of rigorous planning, good data, and, perhaps most of all, knowledge about how to live more sustainably on the planet.

Today, we no longer have the luxury of this excuse. As MLK reminded us, perhaps the biggest human tragedy is having knowledge but not acting on it. We've got the planning methods, the data sets, and the technology to do better. What we lack is the setting, the venue, the conditions in which good, long-term decisions, based on reasoned trade-offs, can be made. What we lack, in other words, is civic innovation. What I mean by this is the ability of people, acting as citizens, to broker dialogue and action across differing viewpoints, disciplines, backgrounds and places to arrive at outcomes that represent our best effort.

Instead, we've got, not always, but too often, argument, rancor, knee-jerk NIMBYism, and the greased palms of too many politicians and planning boards.

What I want to suggest is that land use planning is an essential act of democratic citizenship, a necessary but not sufficient precondition for sustainable development. If we can learn to love our places, as Gary Snyder urges, even if we're otherwise locked in struggle, we can make the tough decisions a sustainable future requires

Which brings us back to the artfulness, the creativity demanded by sustainable development. Like all great innovation, sustainable communities are invention-dependent: they rely on people and institutions coming up with new ways of solving problems But it's not just about technology innovation; it's really about social innovation, the way people behave, plan and act on their futures.

If you think about it, most of the land use challenges I described come down to competition among and between public goods carried out in a most public setting; these are competitions between clean energy and clear ridgelines, between housing for all and habitat for songbirds. These are not easy choices. This is what is come down to.

And so, making the right decision, the right trade-off, is not a formulaic kind of exercise. It's about innovative, creative people and processes that enable a variety of voices and perspectives to be heard and to render their best, as opposed to their worst, judgment on what makes sense for them, their community, and their future. It's about tools, techniques and, above all, people who are committed to thinking and acting like citizens and not just individuals or consumers or opponents. It's about breaking through old, negative patterns of behavior – from racism to sprawl -- patterns passed down from generation to generation, and finding new, positive alternatives – whether embracing diversity or promoting downtown revitalization. And don't think the two aren't connected.

These civic innovators, these pattern breakers, exist. Take Lynne Sherrod, for example. Lynne lives in Routt County, CO and for the past 10 years has been brokering relationships among ranchers and enviros in the Rocky Mountains, establishing a new institution, the Colorado Cattlemans Land Trust 1995 and building new kinds of social capital, new kinds of alliances. This was a revolutionary undertaking for an agricultural organization. The Colorado Cattlemen's Association was the first mainstream ag organization in the nation to form a land trust. Over 30 land trusts exist in Colorado and until CCALT's founding, none exclusively served the needs of the agricultural community. CCALT was created with the primary interests of the landowner in mind. It is a land trust OF landowners, BY landowners, and FOR landowners. CCALT is proving to be an important mechanism in preserving agricultural opportunities and protecting the open space that is valued by both Colorado residents and visitors. To date, they've kept over 150K acres of land in ag.

Or consider Gus Seeling and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, a coalition of land trusts, affordable housing advocates, and historic preservation groups -- who came together in 1986 to form a smart growth organization before the term was even invented.

Fast forward 17 years, and today the Board has helped conserve over 325,000 acres of Vermont's countryside while underwriting the construction of roughly 7500 units of perpetually affordable housing. It has also become a national model, borrowed by states like New Jersey and Rhode Island and revered by smart growth advocates across the country. VHCB is currently one of 18 finalists for the 2005 Innovation in American Government Awards, often called "the Oscars" of government programs

Or how about Bob Liberty in next-door Oregon. In his work with 1000 Friends of Oregon and now as a Portland Metro Council member, Bob has brought together farmers, foresters, developers and citizen groups to figure out how to save farm and forest land and reduce the costs of future growth to taxpayers. He worked with a diverse set of organizations to help replace a plan for a proposed highway through rural Washington County with a new approach to building neighborhoods. He convened a new regional coalition that works for affordable housing and reinvestment in poor neighborhoods while protecting natural areas.

Finally, Arabella Martinez and the Fruitvale Transit Village in Oakland, CA. The Fruitvale Transit Village is a mixed-use development on 15+ acres in a predominantly Hispanic and increasingly Asian low-income community in Oakland. The Transit Village includes a head start child development center, a community-based health care facility, a senior center, a library,

community police station, family and senior housing, and new and renovated retail and office space. These facilities are connected through a pedestrian plaza to the BART station.

Funding for the $100+ million project came from more than 30 sources, including revenue bonds sold by the City of Oakland; HUD grants; leases with Oakland for a library branch and senior center; transportation funding from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission's Transportation for Livable Communities program, and other sources. Groundbreaking took place in January 2002 and the project was recently completed. It represents an innovative strategy for leveraging mass transit to revitalize a low-income, urban community.

These are the kinds of folks, from all walks of life and backgrounds, who are making sustainability happen. And they share some common traits:

Number One, they're institutional folks. They create or lead organizations that have staying power and resources to get results. If an institution doesn't exist but needs to, they create it, like CCLT or VHCB. This is an example of invention dependence in action.

Number Two, they're as much about projects as policy. Civic innovators are generally interested in real engagement, real transactions, real projects first, policy abstractions second. This is where they shine: meeting with people, facilitating conversations, brainstorming new solutions, building new campaigns targeted to specific social problems. Transit-oriented development for urban communities sounded nice, but Arabella Martinez made it real in a $100M project.

Number Three, they tend to work outside conventional job descriptions. A civic innovator, by definition, defies categories and looks at challenges from a holistic, multi-disciplinary, multi-constituency perspective. Ranchers and enviros; affordable housing activists and conservationists; developers and smart growth advocates. If anyone in this room finds they have a hard time describing to people what they do for living, it's probably because they're an innovator of some sort, either that, or out of a job.

Number Four, they choose their scale of intervention carefully. Most innovators take seriously Louis Brandeis's notion that the states are the true laboratories of democracy. They tend to work at the state and sub-state level, with a particular affinity for local and regional approaches, where the feedback loops are smaller and tighter. The federal/national scale is too diffuse and unstable, though it's critical. But few of us live our lives in the abstraction called federal policy or the nation-state; we live on streets and blocks, in neighborhoods, in downtowns, in watersheds. These guys are the true federalists: leveraging state and local resources to effect change at the larger national scale.

Number Five, and finally, civic innovators are defiant optimists. Yea, they suffer the same skepticism and occasional pessimism that most of us who care about social change do. But just when they think the world's going to hell in a hand basket, they do or experience something that turns their own cynicism on its head, that reminds them and others that great things are possible but nothing is possible if you don't try. They understand that the process of social change is an unfolding one, a longitudinal and non-linear one. Patience is their hard-won virtue.

And so, on that note, let me invoke yet another California poet, Adrienne Rich, who writes of this challenging world, “It will not be simple, it will take all your breath, it will become your will.” Yes, it will take all your breath.

To those civic innovators among you, breathe deeply, go forth, create the change. It’s never too late.

Thanks for listening.